



Citation for published version:

Rose, H & McKinley, J 2017, 'The prevalence of pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics: extending the debate', *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 599-604. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw042>

DOI:

[10.1093/applin/amw042](https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw042)

Publication date:

2017

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw042)

This is a pre-copy edited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in *Applied Linguistics* following peer review. The version of record, Rose, H & McKinley, J 2016, 'The prevalence of pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics: extending the debate' *Applied Linguistics*. DOI: 10.1093/applin/amw042 is available online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw042>.

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The prevalence of pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics: extending the debate

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Abstract

In this article we respond to the special issue “Definitions for Applied Linguistics”, where the past and future of applied linguistics are discussed, and the place of pedagogy in the field’s scope is debated. In the issue, Hellermann (2015) uses data from 1980-1984 and 2009-2013 to show a shift in the field towards an emerging range of language-related problems, coupled with the declining prominence of pedagogy-related research in the journal. In this paper, we extend Hellerman’s work in order to investigate whether this trend is reflective of other published work in applied linguistics. In our investigation, 336 research papers published in 2015 were analysed from 10 self-identified applied linguistics journals. Data revealed language-pedagogy related studies constituted 32 percent of all empirical research, although this representation was unevenly distributed across the journals. Findings suggest a number of practice-oriented journals now take the lion’s share of pedagogical research, allowing other key applied linguistics journals to focus on a diverse range of non-pedagogy related language problems. Nevertheless, in general, pedagogy remains a key topic in the field.

Is pedagogy the main focus for applied linguistics?

The question of what applied linguistics means has beleaguered researchers since the field’s inception, and has been the topic of recent renewed interest (e.g. de Bot and Thomas 2015; de Bot 2015). The latest special issue of *Applied Linguistics* on definitions of the field showcased the current views of key scholars in the field. In the introduction to the special issue, Hellermann (2015) reviewed definitions of applied linguistics from journals and organisations, which suggested that the field focused on the identification and betterment of language-related problems. Issues surrounding language pedagogy were notably absent from definitions, except the one proffered by

the British Association of Applied Linguistics. This marks a conceptual departure from the initial stages of applied linguistics, which Cook (2015) argued was concerned primarily with explorations of linguistic theory within the scope of language pedagogy. Both Cook (2015) and Kramsch (2015) highlighted the important relationship between linguistic theory and teaching practice in applied linguistics in these early stages, followed by a rapid widening in scope to include a diverse range of topics from non-linguistic epistemologies.

Hellermann's comparison of published articles in *Applied Linguistics* between the years 1980-1984 and 2009-2013 highlighted the current diversity of applied linguistics research, which has resulted in a drop in pedagogy related articles from 19 to 8 percent, concluding 'the journal is publishing fewer articles focusing on language pedagogy' (Hellermann 2015: 423). In the same special issue, Mauranen (2015: 489) claims that educational theory no longer 'holds a privileged place' in applied linguistics, and indeed linguistics is no longer the only 'relevant discipline'. We sought to investigate whether the decline in pedagogy-related research in *Applied Linguistics* was indicative of a wider movement in the field, and thus also evident in other journals. We aimed to respond to the research question: How prevalent is the topic of language pedagogy in published applied linguistics research today?

Widening the sample

In order to extend the work by Hellermann (2015), we sought to investigate how applied linguistics research was positioned in other relevant research journals. While it was not feasible to examine all journals, we established sampling criteria in order to capture articles that exhibited quality research within applied linguistics. The sampling criteria sought to include articles:

1. in high-impact journals
2. that self-identified as publishing applied linguistics research
3. that represented current research in the field
4. that contained empirical research, or provided a survey of research on a topic

In order to meet the first criteria, the SCImago Journal Rank Indicator was consulted, which is based on information from the Scopus® database. The top 50 journals listed under "Linguistics and Language" were short-listed. 50 were decided as a manageable amount for two researchers to cover in a short time period.

We then consulted each of the journal's home pages in order to assess whether the journals positioned themselves as applied linguistics journals in their scope, which yielded a short-list of 9 journals. In order to ensure we did not miss any vital journals in the field, we confirmed the list with three full professors of applied linguistics working in three regions (Europe, North America, and Australasia), asking them to nominate key omissions, with intention to add any journal nominated by two of the three professors to our sample. The *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* was added due to this process, giving a final list of 10 journals.

In order to sample current research, we elected to do a complete sample of all articles published in these journals in the year 2015. We then evaluated each issue of the 10 journals, and extracted titles and abstracts to ascertain whether they showcased empirical research, including research surveys. Forum pieces, book reviews, and perspective articles were omitted, unless they included original research.

We acknowledge that certain limitations to our methodology exist. Journal rankings do not necessarily indicate that all articles published in them will have high impact; however, they do suggest a level of rigour and scrutiny. We also acknowledge that some key journals may not have made our final shortlist due to not explicitly positioning themselves as journals of applied linguistics research; for example, *Language Teaching Research*, and the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, which do not explicitly use the term applied linguistics in their scope, were not included despite being in the initial short-list of 50 journals. The use of sampling criteria, while restrictive, was nonetheless an objective way to obtain our dataset, without injecting our own judgement of what applied linguistics was, and where it was published. While the study would have benefited from a wider review of journals, in keeping with the purpose of this forum piece to raise issues and report on data that do not warrant a full-length article (Sealey 2015), we have endeavoured to work with a manageable sample.

Findings

In total, 336 articles were reviewed in 10 journals, which are summarized in table 1.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

As with the analysis of *Applied Linguistics* by Hellermann (2015), we coded the articles according to key topics in applied linguistics. While at times this proved challenging, particularly when topics intersected, we independently categorized the articles, and consulted on those which we disagreed on. To improve our consistency, we took part in a moderation exercise, which involved the categorization of *Applied Linguistics* articles from 2009-2015 in order to achieve similar results to those reported in Hellermann.

To facilitate comparability of results, we present our findings alongside Hellermann's, according to the same topics and in the same format.

[TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

Results suggest that language pedagogy remains a key topic in the field, representing over 32 percent of published articles. These findings provide a slightly different overview of applied linguistics than the special issue, which showed that only 8 percent of articles in *Applied Linguistics* were language-pedagogy related. The different findings may be attributable to two key

reasons: our sample included a number of practice-oriented applied linguistics journals that focused specifically on pedagogy; and a fragmentation of the field, as suggested by Cook (2015), has resulted in different journals showcasing different topics in the field. We hypothesized that the growth of journals such as *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly* in research impact rankings, and the emergence of newer journals such as the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, may have allowed other applied linguistics journals to focus on non-education disciplines of study. To confirm this theory, a chi-square test (with a Bonferroni adjustment) was conducted to check journals against article types (pedagogy vs non-pedagogy) in order to confirm differences where pedagogy-related research had appeared. Results revealed a significant association between journal title and topic $\chi^2 (1) = 82.2, p < .001$, and the *Cramer v* statistic (4.95) indicated a medium effect size. Standardized residuals were significant at $p < .001$ for language pedagogy articles to appear in *ELT Journal* ($z = 4.4$) and not to appear in *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* ($z = -2.9$) or *Language Learning* ($z = -3.4$), the two highest impact-factor journals in our data set. Standardized residuals were also significant ($p < .05$) for language pedagogy articles to be associated with *TESOL Quarterly* ($z = 2.1$). All other associations between language pedagogy articles and journals were not significant, indicating they fell within normal distribution, including *Applied Linguistics*.

Implications for Applied linguistics researchers

The results of the study, which was designed to extend Hellermann's (2015) findings with a wider sample, have revealed that language pedagogy is indeed strongly present in applied linguistics. However, findings indicate the place of pedagogy within applied linguistics may have fragmented and may be unevenly distributed to certain segments in the field and their associated publications, thus concurring with trends reported in the special issue. Cook (2015), for example, noted a methodological and theoretical separation of sub-fields in applied linguistics—some of which operate independently within different epistemologies. The results of our study indicate that language pedagogy-related research in applied linguistics, once the centrepiece of the field, is now mostly found in journals that place practice at their core (e.g. *ELT Journal* and *TESOL Quarterly*). Furthermore, Kramersch (2015) claims that as the field has intellectualized, the gap has widened between researchers and practitioners, meaning teachers no longer have the theoretical knowledge or desire to read journals like *Applied Linguistics*. Our findings support this notion, but we would argue that teachers may still find substantial pedagogical content in *Applied Linguistics*, compared to journals such as *Language Learning* and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*.

The disproportionate representation of applied linguistics research across the journals may also be explained in part by Shuy's (2015) report that historical and current links with education may unfairly be the cause of a low status for applied linguistics research when compared to other linguistic disciplines—which Mauranen (2015: 491) summarizes as being 'tainted by the association'. Thus, some applied linguistics journals (especially those with a cognitive or SLA focus) may purposely align their research with their 'parent

discipline' of linguistics, rather than with education. The 'comparatively low status held by the field of education in general' (Shuy 2015: 436), while unjustified, could also explain why so many education-oriented journals self-identify as applied linguistics, and why many applied linguists are publishing in journals which do not state education in their scope.

Finally, in spite of the diversification illustrated in this review, our study has also showcased a degree of uniformity in the field. In our sample, 6 of the 10 journals illustrated a similar balance of pedagogy and non-pedagogy related research, including the journals *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *Language Teaching*, *English for Specific Purposes*, *Modern Language Journal*, and *Applied Linguistics*. Although pedagogy may not be a main focus for these journals, it nevertheless maintains a key position, if only for the reason that applied linguistics needs to remain 'parasitic on practical language teaching and learning' (McNamara 2015: 467). We would argue that this balance will likely remain in the foreseeable future, due to the sheer volume of research emerging from the booming field of English language teaching. Thus, while the profile of research topics in certain journals might change, overall pedagogy is unlikely to lose its foothold in applied linguistics research in general.

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Table 1: The final sample of articles

Journal Title	No. of articles
Annual Review of Applied Linguistics	13
Applied Linguistics	34
ELT Journal	32
English for Specific Purposes	31
Journal of English for Academic Purposes	40
Language Learning	42
Language Teaching	36
Modern Language Journal	53
Studies in Second Language Acquisition	23
TESOL Quarterly	32
TOTAL	336

Table 2: Results of journal topic, compared to Hellermann (2015)

Topic	Applied Linguistics 1980-1984	Applied Linguistics 2009-2014	Our sample of 10 journals in 2015
L2 acquisition and use	49%	34%	25%
Discourse (text) analysis	17%	25%	21%
Sociolinguistics	0%	11%	6%
Language pedagogy	19%	8%	32%
Other¹	15%	22% ²	16%

¹ 'Other' included: assessment, language policy, multilingualism, pragmatics, linguistic theory, research methods, etc.

² Hellermann (2015) did not report an 'other' category in his results, thus this figure represents the unreported percentage